Athletic Directors and Professors Find More to Agree on Than Expected

By BILL PENNINGTON

A year ago, a surprising and unusual alliance of university trustees and professors was formed, a partnership aimed at finding ways to restrain the growth and excesses of big-time college sports. At the time, it was likened to the Hatfields joining forces with the McCoys.

Twelve months later, the faculty group, known as the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, is still looking for new allies and still turning to the list of long-established adversaries for help. Late last month, the coalition of professors met privately with a group of college athletic directors, those hands-on managers of the modern monolith of intercollegiate athletics.

"On the face of it, it was the cobra sitting down with the mongoose," said James Earl, an English professor at the University of Oregon and the co-chairman of the faculty coalition. He attended the meeting of five prominent leaders of faculty senates and five athletic directors representing some of the foremost college athletic powers.

"You would think on the subject of college athletics reform there would be discord, or certainly no common ground," he said. "But in fact, we got along well. There was no strong disagreement."

Andy Geiger, the director of athletics at Ohio State, attended the meeting, which was convened Jan. 23 by Myles Brand, president of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, at the association's headquarters in Indianapolis.

"There's no question, everyone came into the room pretty defensive," Geiger said. "But the athletic directors discovered we weren't being called into the woodshed. That calmed me down right away. I left the meeting feeling that this group can go farther toward making real, genuine change than any other group I know of."

Brand had a similar reaction. "These were two groups that weren't talking," he said. "There was a lot of suspicion. True, they still won't agree on everything. But now there is trust building and that is an incredibly important outcome. For there to be real change, everyone must be heading in the same direction."

Just where they are heading is another matter. The goals of the alliance of faculty and trustees, which has also enlisted the guidance and endorsement of the N.C.A.A. leadership, are sweeping. It is seeking a series of revisions in how an athletic department interacts with the rest of a university — dealing with everything from athletic abuses that have led to scandal, to curbing the continuing race to build newer, more lavish athletic facilities. The timetable for any change could be as long as a decade.

These broad goals, which deal with many topics, may not be controversial by themselves. But how they would be implemented and what kind of N.C.A.A. rulings they would require is controversial. Faculty members and athletic directors at the meeting last month agreed that the manner in which individual institutions put policy into practice varies so greatly from campus to campus that a single new reform measure could probably be applied in dozens of different ways. The logistics of that process are thorny.
Still, several of the professors and athletic directors said it was revealing that there was uniform agreement on many short-term goals, like the N.C.A.A.'s academic initiative that would tie the classroom performance of athletes to the number of athletic scholarships a college is permitted to award.

"Not only was there no disagreement on new academic standards, there was no disagreement as to whether these changes were a good idea," said Geiger, who is on the board of the association of Division I-A athletic directors and who oversees one of the largest college athletic budgets. "I think the faculty members were more surprised at our stand than we were at theirs."

Robert Eno, an associate professor of East Asian studies at Indiana and a co-chairman of the faculty coalition, said he thought the athletic directors were comforted by better understanding his group, too. "They learned that we weren't a bunch of radical, inflexible faculty addicted to yelling about athletics," he said.

Also attending was Virginia Shepherd, a pathology professor and a past president of the faculty senate at Vanderbilt, who will soon take over Earl's position on the coalition. The athletic directors at the meeting were Geiger, Kevin White of Notre Dame, Rick Dickson of Tulane, Jim Copeland of Southern Methodist and Larry Templeton of Mississippi State.

The day after the meeting, the coalition of faculty leaders met with John D. Walda, chairman of the board of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, an organization that represents 34,500 trustees, regents, presidents, chancellors and administrators. In that meeting, according to Eno and Earl, Walda detailed plans to present new guidelines for how involved trustees should be in the governing of athletics on campuses nationwide.

"That presentation, to me, was breathtaking," Earl said. "All of us, in many quarters, are much more on the same page with this than anyone would have ever thought."

The faculty coalition's origins can be traced to Earl and the Oregon campus in Eugene. Professors protested when the university, in the midst of budget cuts in other departments, announced that it would break ground on an $80 million expansion of the football stadium. Dissent on the Oregon campus bred a movement to re-examine the role of athletics at the university. Then, taking Oregon's lead, faculty senates across the West Coast joined together in a similar effort. This movement spread eastward, and now more than 60 major universities, most of them in conferences that are part of college football's Bowl Championship Series, have participated in the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics.

Last year, the coalition spawned another new association — among the coalition, the governing boards group and the N.C.A.A. — called the Alliance for Athletic Reform. This group has also proposed an initial set of goals. And in the last six months, there have been conventions and meetings on college athletic reform involving a host of other groups, including the American Association of University Professors and an association of college academic advisers for athletes.

"We are looking for ways to do more than talk," Eno said. "But as the endorsements build between college administrators, faculty, athletic directors, coaches, trustees and faculty advisers, our hope is that the volume of support will exert continued constructive pressure on all groups connected with athletics and with reform."
"We have to wait for the payoff, but we have every intention of moving comprehensive reform from rhetoric to a real possibility."

Among the most promising accomplishments of the recent meeting between athletic directors and faculty members, both sides agreed, was what the professors learned about how athletic directors do their jobs.

"It was a productive dialogue because it laid out the crux of the dilemma," Dickson of Tulane said. "On the one hand, we have athletic programs operating in a completely balanced setting, being told they must maximize revenue to pay for themselves independent of the institution. And on the other hand, the athletic programs are told that philosophically they must be integrated with the campus."

Brand, who sounded the most enthusiastic about what the meeting had accomplished, said he thought the reform movement would continue to flourish precisely because it had begun to break down barriers.

"The problem with college athletics is the growing separation of athletic departments, in fact and in attitude, from the rest of the campus," Brand said. "We've got to bring athletics back into a single college experience."

While some skeptics may dismiss this kind of coalition building as merely chatter, the participants think otherwise. "People might say this is just talk," Geiger said. "They're right; it is just talk. And we're not going to get anywhere without talk. Not everybody agrees what kind of change there will be. But there will be change. And it can start with the help of the folks who were in that room in Indianapolis."

There was a final outcome of the meeting between faculty leaders and athletic directors: they agreed to meet again this spring.